

TRADES COUNCILS: THEIR FUNCTIONS AND WORK.

1. IMPORTANCE OF TRADES COUNCILS.

The basic strength of the Labour Movement rests in its ability to unite the working people for united action around a common policy. The Trades Councils, as the main unifying centre for the Trade Union branches in each locality, are therefore of decisive importance in the structure of the Labour Movement.

All the great national and international problems connected with mobilisation for victory and the democratic solution of post-war reconstruction have their specific local aspects. Within the framework of national policy on these matters, the Trades Councils can play an increasingly important role in mobilising the workers for the solution of these problems in a democratic way.

A marked revival in the work of Trades Councils is making itself felt. Many thousands of workers are becoming involved in their activities for the first time. There is considerable discussion on the present role and future of these bodies. It is for these reasons that we devote this Educational Leaflet to the work of Trades Councils.

2. TWO TYPES OF TRADES COUNCIL.

Generally speaking, Trades Councils are co-ordinating bodies which enable all T.U. branches in a given locality to maintain regular co-operation and to carry on joint work on all matters of common interest.

In practice, they fall into two main types:—

- (a) *Purely industrial bodies, i.e., Councils made up exclusively from affiliated T.U. organisations. These are generally known simply as "Trades Councils."*
- (b) *Composite bodies with separate industrial and political sections, combining both T.U. and Labour Party organisations. These are generally known as the "Trades and Labour Council" or the "Trades Council and Labour Party."*

The 1938 and 1939 T.U.C. Reports commented on a "tendency on the part of joint bodies . . . to separate into two distinct units of Industrial and Political sections, with separate officers, committee, etc." It was stated that "this would enable the work of the two wings of the movement to be carried out in a more satisfactory manner." In 1939 it was reported that "more than three-quarters of the Trades Councils recognised by the

General Council are separate industrial bodies" (i.e., Trades Councils as described in point a).

3. THE FUNCTIONS OF TRADES COUNCILS.

The breadth and importance of the functions performed by these Councils may be gauged from a description given by the General Secretary of the T.U.C., to the effect that they:—

"Serve on a local basis the common interest of workers in much the same way that the Trades Union Congress acts as a national organisation . . . form a common centre for the local branches of the various unions and exercise an important function in unifying the local activities of the movement."

The wide and varied functions of the T.U.C. nationally and the Trades Councils locally do not easily lend themselves to formal definition. The *Model Rules* endorsed by the T.U.C. and Labour Party for Trades Councils and Industrial Sections of Trades Councils and Labour Parties do, however, provide an official definition (Clause xvii), as follows:—

- (a) *To promote the interests of all its affiliated organisations, and to secure united action on all questions affecting or likely to affect their interests;*
- (b) *To help to promote suitable educational, social and sports facilities for adult workers;*
- (c) *To establish more intimate relations between its affiliated organisations and the Trades Union Congress;*
- (d) *To improve generally the economic and social conditions of the workers;*
- (e) *To support and work for the application of the Industrial Workers' charter, and such objects as the Trades Union Congress may from time to time determine.*

Within the framework of these *Objects* and the policy of the T.U.C. the Trades Councils have tremendous scope for initiating united action on a local scale on all matters affecting the lives of the workers.

4. ORIGIN OF TRADES COUNCILS.

In the *History of Trade Unionism*, Sydney and Beatrice Webb refer to "the formation between 1858 and 1867 of permanent Trades Councils in the leading industrial centres." and say that this was

"an important step in the consolidation of the Trade Union movement."

The establishment of permanent Councils was the outcome of experience ranging back for nearly half a century. Local delegate meetings of representatives of all trades to tackle some particular emergency had become a feature of T.U. life since the early years of the 19th century.

In Glasgow, for example, there had been an "almost continuous series of joint committees" since 1825, preceding the formation of a permanent Trades Council there in 1858.

In London the so-called *Metropolitan Trades Delegates* preceded by twelve years the establishment of the London Trades Council in 1860. The formation of the Council arose directly from the weekly meetings of a joint trades committee formed to assist the building trades workers during the great lock-out of 1859.

5. WHAT TRADES COUNCILS HAVE ACHIEVED.

As already stated, the formation of joint trades committees to tackle emergencies became a feature of T.U. life early in the 19th century. Examples of this are the work of joint committees in 1824 to secure the Repeal of the Combination Laws (under which Trade Unions were illegal bodies), and in 1834 to protest against the sentences on the six Dorchester Labourers (the "Tolpuddle Martyrs," whose crime was the organisation of agricultural labourers).

Prior to the formation of the T.U.C., it was the Trades Councils which took the initiative in launching national campaigns by the T.U. movement.

The London Trades Council, in 1866, initiated and "*took a leading part in the agitation which resulted in the enfranchisement of the town artisans.*"

The Glasgow Trades Council initiated the campaign which, in 1867, brought "*the first positive success of the Trade Unions in the legislative field*"—the introduction of a new "*Master and Servant*" Act (for details, see *History of Trade Unionism*).

At all times of national emergency the workers in industrial centres instinctively turn to the Trades Council as the focal point for common class action. This was the case, for example, in 1888-1889 (when the London Trades Council organised solidarity with the match-girls and the dockers during the famous strikes), in 1920 (when they were the basis for Councils of Action in the great "Hands off Russia" campaign), in 1923 (when they were the main force in the "Back to the Unions" campaign of the T.U.C.), in 1926 (when they were the basis of the local centres of leadership in the General Strike) and, later, in mobilising support for Republican Spain.

Apart from such big, spectacular efforts at times of crisis, Trades Councils have a splendid record of solid work on local issues. Though not so dramatic, this work—e.g., on housing surveys, local amenities, Trade Union recruitment—has profound influence in its own sphere.

The Trades Councils have also, on many occasions, been the initiators in developing new forms of organisation in the Labour Movement.

The T.U.C. itself owes its origin to the Trades Councils. The Manchester Trades Council convened the Conference which, in 1868, established the T.U.C. The London Trades Council was instrumental in securing the appointment, in 1871, of the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C., which later, in 1921, became the General Council.

Following the creation of the Labour Party in 1900, the Trades Councils became the centres around which the local structure of the Labour Party was built. It was the Trades Councils which led in securing the election of Labour men in local government, and which provided the framework for the electoral machinery of the Labour Party.

6. THE STATUS OF TRADES COUNCILS.

Status—in the sense of influence and authority—cannot be conferred; it has to be earned, it depends on effort and achievement. The greater the initiative, activity and achievement of a Trades Council, the higher will it stand in the eyes of the workers and greater will be its influence on local affairs. The better the organisation and the more solid the results achieved in furthering the objects of trade unionism, the greater will be the standing of the Trades Councils within the Labour Movement as a whole.

In the more formal sense, i.e., in respect of the place of Trades Councils within the machinery of the movement, the Trades Councils have an agreed status.

They form an integral part of the machinery of the T.U.C., serving, in effect, as its local agency. On the one hand, they serve as the "eyes and ears" of the T.U.C. on local working class affairs, the secretary of the Council being the "Labour Correspondent" of the General Council. On the other hand, they transmit and devise ways and means of translating into united local action the policy and campaigns of the T.U.C. At the same time, they have power to initiate campaigns and other special efforts around local or national issues.

The Councils are linked with each other through district Federations and a National Federation of Trades Councils, which has its own Annual Conference. They are linked with the T.U.C. through a Joint Trades Councils Consultative

Committee, which includes six representatives elected from the Trades Councils and six appointed from the General Council. A fraternal delegate represents the Trades Councils at the meetings of the T.U.C. (*Note* : Scottish Trades Councils may affiliate to and be represented at the Scottish T.U.C.).

Combined bodies, such as a Trades Council and Labour Party, affiliate direct to the Labour Party and may send delegates to its National Conference.

7. HOW TRADES COUNCILS ARE ORGANISED.

All branches of T.U.'s affiliated to or recognised by the T.U.C. may affiliate to and be represented on the Trades Council in their area. (*Note* : In 1935 "Circular 16" placed a ban on members of the Communist Party being elected as delegates from T.U. branches to Trades Councils. This discrimination, which tended to weaken the Councils, has now been lifted).

As a rule, these Councils meet monthly, with an Executive Committee and Officers to function between meetings.

Each Trades Council (or Industrial Section of a combined body) is divided into groups, corresponding roughly with the industrial groups within the T.U.C., modified to fit in with local conditions. There may be up to five industrial groups (Group B, for instance, comprises unions in the shipbuilding, engineering, iron and steel, and building industries) plus the Women's Group.

These groups are potentially of great importance. Just as the Council enables all workers in the locality to act together *as a class*, so the groups enable workers in kindred trades to act together on matters affecting *an industry*, thus overcoming any tendency to narrow sectionalism, enabling them to work to a common policy and strengthening the feeling for *amalgamations and further progress in the direction of industrial unionism*.

In the case of combined bodies, the Industrial and Political Sections have separate meetings and separate executive committees for the transaction of distinctive industrial and political (*i.e.*, Labour Party) business. But they also have regular joint meetings and, as a rule, the officers are elected by and function for the Council as a whole.

8. HOW TRADES COUNCILS CAN STRENGTHEN THE T.U. MOVEMENT.

Although T.U. membership is greater than ever before, it is a fact that the number of workers eligible for membership has grown more rapidly than has intake into the unions. **Only between eight and nine million workers out of nearly twenty millions eligible are in Trade Unions.**

The efforts of individual Trade Unions, in isolation from each other, are not sufficient to tackle this problem. Trade Councils can become a most powerful factor in organising the unorganised and augmenting the recruiting work of individual unions.

Some of the ways in which this can be achieved are :—

- General recruiting campaigns in the area of each Council, mobilising all forces of the movement for these efforts.
- Special recruiting campaigns, *e.g.*, among women workers, or youth, in particular industries, or in factories where organisation is backward.
- Opening up new areas, *e.g.*, neighbouring places where new industries have been developed since the war, by "adopting" them and working to make them strong union centres.
- Helping to build factory organisation by special efforts to explain the need for shop stewards, works committees, and Joint Production Committees, showing how these function, etc.
- Strengthening existing factory organisation by such measures as conferences at which members of works committees and Joint Production Committees can exchange experiences, discuss common problems, and so improve their work. (*Note* : The importance of the Works Committees in large factories, and the need to link their work more closely with that of the Unions, has given rise to a desire in many quarters for them to be represented on Trades Councils).
- Equipping new personnel for official positions as shop stewards, branch committeemen, etc., by organising regular educational work through lectures, classes and schools on such subjects as "The Work of Shop Stewards," "T.U. Branch Administration," "The British Labour Movement," etc.

9. HOW TRADES COUNCILS CAN STRENGTHEN THE WAR EFFORT.

All recruiting and organisational work conducted by Trades Councils will be more effective if, at the same time, they display initiative and energy in tackling local problems arising from war-time conditions. The scope for such initiative is enormous, as was indicated in the statement of the General Secretary of the T.U.C. that Trades Councils "serve on a local basis the common interest of workers in much the same way that the Trades Union Congress acts as a national organisation."

A survey of reports from Trades Councils reveals the following as typical ways in which they are at present active :—

- Securing T.U. representation on local committees of State bodies.

There is a wide range of such committees, many of them vital for the war effort, dealing with production, supply, fuel, price regulations, youth, etc. Most have provision for representation of trade unionists. Trades Councils can generally ensure that this is secured by nominating workers' representatives.

—**Keeping under review the local situation in respect of the matters dealt with by these war-time committees and local government authorities as they affect trade unions—e.g., transport, housing, nursery schools, shopping facilities—and working out proposals and lines of action for tackling any difficulties that obstruct the war effort of the workers.**

—**Making representations to the appropriate local authorities on these matters, taking whatever joint action may be needed to secure the adoption of the proposals brought forward by the unions.**

—**Supporting individual unions or works committee in taking up with employers or local authorities questions which, if not satisfactorily settled, may affect the interests of the workers generally in the area concerned.**

—**Maintaining contact with Labour Councillors and workers' representatives on other local authorities, ensuring close co-operation and mutual support in carrying out agreed policy on local matters.**

10. THE FUTURE OF TRADES COUNCILS.

The entire history of the T.U. Movement proves the absolute need for some body which can function as a centre for co-ordinating all T.U. organisations and mobilising the workers for action on a local scale. With the increasing complexity of T.U. structure, the diversity of its functions, and the decisive role they must play in the war and post-war period, that need has increased and will continue to increase. The Trades Councils have been evolved to meet the need, and will become increasingly important.

The problem might be put in this way :

- (1) *The T.U. organisations in any locality need a common centre to co-*

ordinate their efforts and undertake activities in the general interest.

- (2) *The T.U.C., as the national body co-ordinating the work of its affiliated organisations, requires local agencies which will act on its behalf in operating T.U.C. policy "on the spot."*

Thus far, the problem is not difficult. The Trades Council, or Industrial Section of Trades Councils and Labour Parties, provides the basis.

But the problem is much wider. The strengthening of the Trade Unions is only one element in the problem of strengthening the Labour Movement as a whole and co-ordinating the work of its main sections. The wider problem, therefore, involves :—

- (1) *The strengthening of the Labour Party and Co-operative Movement as well as the Trade Unions.*
- (2) *Co-ordination of the work of the T.U. movement in every locality with that of the Labour Party and other sections of the Labour Movement.*

Discussion about how this can best be achieved is growing.

Is it by a uniform system of combined Trades Councils and Labour Parties, with greater autonomy for the Industrial and Political Sections respectively ?

Or is it by separating into distinct Trades Councils on the one hand, and Labour Parties on the other hand, with some new form of co-ordination—perhaps a local adaptation of the National Council of Labour, which is the supreme authority in the Labour Movement and comprises representatives of the T.U.C., the Labour Party and the Co-operative Movement ?

The advocates of the latter point of view claim that this form would give greater scope for the development of each individual section, while at the same time providing for effective unity of action by all sections on a local scale.

It is too early to forecast what path will, in fact, be taken. But one thing is clear : **the future forms of Trades Council organisation will grow out of and be determined by the experience they gain in tackling seriously the problems of mobilising the workers and strengthening the unions for the achievement of the most speedy and rapid victory over Hitlerism.**

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Each leaflet in this series is intended to "state the case"—and to help workers to argue the case!—for some section of the Labour Movement, or for some cause shared by the movement as a whole. Leaflet No. 1 was **Why You should be a Co-operator**. The present leaflet is revised and reprinted from the Educational Commentary issued fortnightly by Marx House.

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